are you sure this is a good idea?

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/24265483.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
Multi

Fandom:
The Penumbra Podcast

Relationship:
Lord Arum/Sir Damien/Rilla (Penumbra Podcast)

Characters:
Sir Caroline, Sir Angelo, Sir Talfryn (Penumbra Podcast), Sir Marc (Penumbra Podcast), Sir Damien (Penumbra Podcast), Rilla (Penumbra Podcast), Lord Arum (Penumbra Podcast)

Additional Tags:
superhero au

Language:
English

Collections:
The Penumbra Minibang 2019-2020

Stats:
Published: 2020-05-19 Words: 16,032 Chapters: 1/1

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by Readerofmuch

Summary

Damien lives an average life, working shift work as a security guard and coming home to his beautiful, brilliant fiancee. The hero known as Arrow has a more taxing one, full of crime fighting and even a new nemesis, the mysterious Lily. But when Rilla introduces him to her newest coworker and his thorny field of scientific inquiry, everything Damien loves may end up getting caught in the crossfire.
Rilla knows that her fiance puts himself at risk every day. It's something she's come to accept, like he accepts that her work is important. Her newest coworker, the mysterious Dr. Arum Lord, agrees- the work they're doing is important and he will see it completed no matter what the cost. But Rilla doesn't realize just how much danger this work may put her in…
Arum is exhausted, driven beyond tired in his quest to save his much-beloved and much-needed Keep. Between nights facing off with a snarky speedster and the fascinating scientist who fills his days, he's not sure how long he'll be able to keep his head above water (though he's certain that with this company, he may be able to bring himself to enjoy drowning). The question he hasn't thought to ask though: what else may be lurking under the water?

Notes

This is my piece for the Penumbra minibang 2019-2020- my incredible artist, Taylor, has their work here:
and it's INCREDIBLE
Make sure to leave them some love!

See the end of the work for more notes

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I’ll be alright, my forever flower.”

“I still don’t know how Mira talked you into this.”

“I confess, I’m the one who had to talk her into it! And besides, I’m only patrolling- it won’t take more than a few hours. I’ll go absolutely mad if they put me on cameras for another night.”

“Alright. I love you, Damien.”

“I love you too. I’ll see you soon.”

The superhero known as Arrow hung up and looked over the empty building in front of him.

It was supposed to be a routine patrol. He was still half on leave- the only reason Mirror had let him come back at all was the knowledge that he’d go vigilante if she didn’t put him to use. Queen Labs was already under high security watch. All he had to do was a perimeter sweep every half an hour at whatever speed he could. He didn’t even have to report unless anything happened, although he did keep half an eye on the group chat.

It was on his third pass that he noticed the broken window. There was no way a normal criminal could break the window without his realizing. Which meant he was going in.

He hesitated for all of thirty seconds over his communicator. The only hero in range was Stone’s Throw, who would only cause more damage. Mirror might even send the Winter Knight, pulling her from some task that was surely more important than some routine break-in. It would be a shame to waste everyone’s time like that. No, this was on him alone.

He was at the window before he could think any better. Saints, he’d forgotten about his leg. It throbbed painfully, reminding him very firmly to stay contained to more human speeds.

He knelt to look at the window. On closer inspection, the ground floor window actually hadn’t been broken at all- it had been displaced. The pane of glass was sitting on the ground directly beside it, leaned carefully against the wall and supported by- vines?

This got odder and odder.

Through the window, Arrow could see the slightest hint of movement. It wasn't near the window, though, so he moved quickly, sneaking through the window and landing hard on the basement floor. He didn't swear, but the hiss of breath caught the attention of the shadowy figure on the other side of the room and- well.

The supervillain (and with the vines swaying around him like snakes and the lily-pad serving as an impromptu table, definitely a supervillain) was beautiful, with a scaled half-mask over his eyes and down one side. What could be seen of his cheekbones was absolutely magnificent, to say nothing of his jawline.

"Speechless already? I though you heroes were more prone to… banter."

The villain laughs, a strange, chuffing thing.

"My apologies, friend lizard. I was waiting for you to surrender. I promise, things will end better for you if they do."

"I'm not a lizard! Call me… Lily."

"It's such a shame to have to pluck such a beautiful flower. Last chance for a peaceful surrender."

The villain laughs and launches forward. Damien grins and darts out of the way.

In truth, Damien enjoys it. It's not right and he knew that, but it had been so long since he had a proper fight like this. After being benched from training (even Angelo wouldn't train with him, and wasn't that something?) and he hadn't lied to Rilla, for once, when he said he'd go crazy with another night on monitors. At the thought of Rilla, he missed a step. Instantly, the vines got him, knocking him off his feet. Lily's violet cloak swirled as he leaned in for the final blow with a tiny, wicked sharp knife and hesitated, just a breath. Arrow waited.

"It seems you've forgotten the first lesson of fighting a speedster," murmured Arrow.

"What was that, Honeysuckle?"

"Don't get in too close," he breathed, with Lily just inches

away from the final blow. And then, suddenly, the villain was flat on his back with Damien standing victoriously above.

"Oh Honeysuckle," said Lily. "What comes next?"

"Prison, almost certainly," said Arrow, though he felt less sure than he sounded.

"I'm a creature of the earth as much as any of my plants, Honeysuckle. Put me in prison, and I'll wither away to nothing."

"You're a creature of the earth," said Arrow, distractedly. "Of course! This entire fight was unfair, to you and to the guild for which I stand."

"You look like you're about to keel over," said Lily. Arrow ignored him and the throbbing in his leg.

"If I were to take you in now, it would be downright unjust."

"You- what?"

"Pick your place," said Arrow. "Tonight, you go free.In one week's time, we fight on fairer turf. My leg will be healed, and you will be in your proper element. You're a man- well, a being of honour."

He extended a hand to the prone supervillain.

"Very well," said the Lily. He took Arrow's hand and pulled himself up. Then, quick as a flash, his plants lifted him up and out the window. Arrow followed and the window sealed gently behind them. Lily set one boot on the dirt and vanished as surely as if the Sorceress herself had teleported him away.

Damien glanced at his communicator. It was half an hour past when he was meant to be home; Rilla would be worried. His chest felt like a hummingbird had taken up residence. It was fine, all was fine. He could be home as soon as he let Mirror know he was finished. Perhaps he'd keep the supervillain to himself, though.

He sent Mirror the agreed-upon message and sat down to wait. His leg was throbbing again. He glanced at the group chat, to fill the time and distract him from what was coming.

WINTER KNIGHT: More vigilantes- caught the Salamander and his

henchman trying to take down the Janus Twins. I managed to bring Janus into custody despite the vigilantes, but the Salamander is still out there.

STONE'S THROW: VERY GOOD, SIR WINTER! CONGRATULATIONS ON A SUCCESSFUL APPREHENSION!

WINTER KNIGHT: Stone, do you have caps lock on again?

STONE'S THROW: ALAS, IT APPEARS I-

STONE'S THROW: Alas, it appears I did! I've now remedied the situation.

WINTER KNIGHT: Wonderful.

When the world shifted, Arrow closed his eyes. Mirror's prismatic alternate realm was horrifying to look at- full of twisted corners and mirrors that showed things they could not possibly know. The last time he'd looked-

"Arrow! What's happened to your arm?"

Damien opened his eyes. He was standing in the middle of central command. Less charitable heroes had called it the throne room before. He glanced down at his arm and saw that he had a long gash down his arm. It wasn't deep, but it would be noticeable.

"I, uh, tripped."

"You tripped?"

On the chair at the head of the room, Mirror looked distinctly unimpressed. Damien had to admit that, standing on the ground in front of it, it did bear a number of similarities to a throne.

"Quite ironically, while I was standing still! It's quite the tale- I was watching the building quietly. Not the sort of quiet where your heartbeat in your ears is your only company. The noises of the evening were actually quite pleasant. In fact- "

"Thank you, Damien," interrupted Mirror. "I think that will be enough. I'm sure you're eager to be home. If there's nothing else to report, you're dismissed."

Damien nodded and tried to ignore how disconcertingly close it felt to bowing.

"Good night," he said and then left, quickly. He knew what Mirror did to traitors all too well. It wasn't something he had any desire to experience himself.

When he finally got home, he wasn't wearing his costume. Instead, he had a windbreaker and a ball cap, both labelled CASTLE SECURITY.

"Thanks for the lift," he said.

"Of course! I'll see you tomorrow, friend Damien!"

The security van pulled away from the curb. It was all Damien could do to avoid face-planting onto the little patch of grass that constituted a lawn in front of the bungalow. Instead, he trudged forward and made his way inside.

The bungalow was quiet and dark. One benefit of living further from the centre of Citadel City- the night was quiet out here in a way it wasn't in other places. When Rilla had first proposed moving to the little bungalow her parents had dubbed Exile, it wasn't an easy sell. Now, though, he understood the appeal. He took his shoes off and padded through the living room. In the bedroom, he could hear Rilla's gentle breaths.

When he settled in next to her nearly half an hour later (super speed was a perk; super metabolism and its constant need for snacks, less so), she shifted to give him space.

"Hello, my love," he murmured.

"Hmm," she said. "H'was it t'night?"

"Dull," said Damien. Guilt twisted in his gut like a particularly nasty stab wound. He ignored it and turned to kiss Rilla gently on the forehead. She wound herself more tightly around him and he had to fight to keep himself from drawing vine comparisons. He felt like he would be awake all night.

Not five minutes later, the only sound in the house was slow, even breathing. And if any of Arrow's nightmares troubled Damien that night, none were enough to wake him completely.

In a very different home, two people-well, beings- were up and moving around.

“I’m trying, my Keep. I’ll have help for you soon.”

A few gentle notes filled the air.

“I know, but we have to be certain. I can’t just trust anyone to- “

Sharp notes cut the voice off and he grimaced.

“Yes, I know. I’m meeting her tomorrow and then-”

A teasing handful of notes filled the air.

“It’s not like that, I- is now the best time for this conversation?”

The next notes were gentle.

“I know. I’ll go to bed soon, I promise. I just want to try one last treatment.”

The last notes were resigned, but the love in them was clear.

The next morning dawned bright and early. Too early for those who spent their nights running around in masks. Damien woke up in a tangle of blankets, still warm in the early morning sun. He didn’t have to be up for hours, but he could hear the shower running and he smiled. He gave himself a moment more to wake up before springing into motion.

“Damein! Not in the house.”

Damen stopped for a moment.

“Yes my love!”

“There are new protein bars in the dresser.”

“Thank you!”

Slowing himself down to a speed humans could match, he got dressed and ate.

By the time Rilla made her exhausted way into the kitchen, he already had breakfast well underway. She ignored him, pouring herself a cup of coffee and putting the kettle on for Damien.

“Omelet?” asked Damien.

“No thanks,” said Rilla. She sat down at the kitchen table with her coffee. Damien set an omelet in front of her. Rilla gently pushed the omelet aside.

“I’m not hungry, Damien. I’ll have something later.”

“Whatever you say,” said Damien, plating another omelet and eyeing the remaining fillings speculatively. “Your lunch is by the stove.”

“Thanks,” said Rilla, already half through her coffee. She looked about three-quarters asleep.

“Of course,” said Damien.

Ten minutes of quiet and one cup of coffee later, Rilla grabbed her work bag (black, plain, chemically durable) and kissed Damien on the forehead on her way out of the house.

It was only after Rilla had left that Damien saw that she'd forgotten her lunch. Of course. A morning person, his fiancee was not. He could text her, but she would already be halfway to work. No use in making her late when he'd be in town later anyways for physio.

Physio! He could break the sound barrier if he was well-caffeinated and they had him doing leg lifts and ankle rolls. And the worst part? It was working.

The buses were never on time, of course. He could have gotten there faster himself, if that hadn't been a terrible idea for a multitude of reasons. He used the time to compose a sonnet for Rilla and (mostly) to go back over the morning. He'd made Rilla breakfast just the way she liked. She didn't like anything heavy in the morning, but he hadn't made her anything particularly solid. Why hadn't she wanted it? Was it the omelet at all? What if she didn't like his cooking? What if she didn't like him?

That was ridiculous, she loved him. She had agreed to marry him, for Saints' sake! But still... he needed so much from her.

Damien took a deep breath.

When he'd broken his leg, Rilla had been all that kept him alive when he was stuck in bed. That was something tangible. She wouldn't do that for someone she didn't care about. But... She was a scientist, the scientist responsible for his powers. She might take care of him only to protect her investment. She might be waiting for him to heal before

letting him down easily.

"Sorry Damien," he could hear her say. "I never actually wanted to marry you. You're just an experiment- that's all you ever were."

Damien could feel himself hyperventilating. Distantly, he knew that wasn't an ideal situation. He fumbled his phone out and breathed with the gif Rilla had found him. He breathed. When he finally reached the stop outside of Queen Labs, he was feeling better. Better than what, of course, had yet to be determined.

The security guard at the door buzzed him in and, after he'd gone through the metal detector, handed him a visitor's badge and a dosimeter.

He made his way down towards Rilla's lab. She knew he was coming, but not when, so he knocked lightly on the door.

The person who opened the door was not who he expected. Rather than his fiancee, the figure was a tall, almost gaunt man who loomed gently over Damien. He had strong features, with a jawline that could have served as a lab scalped. He was also (and perhaps most importantly) rather impatient.

"Yes?"

"I'm- I have Rilla's lunch."

"I'm afraid she's not in the lab at the moment," said the man. At Damien's startled expression, he hurried to explain. "She's processing samples using the mass spectroscopy next door. I'll tell her you were here. You're her... boyfriend?"

"Not as such," said Damien, distracted. This man seemed familiar. "Tell her Damien was here."

"Of course."

The other man stepped back but before he could close the door, Damien shifted subtly so his cast blocked the door.

"Say, friend, I don't think I caught your name."

"I'm Lord, Arum Lord. Doctor Arum Lord. Was there anything else I could do for you?"

"No, thank you. I'll put this in the staff fridge, then. Tell Rilla I was

here."

"I will," said Arum, confused. "Thank you... Damien."

Damien nodded and let him close the door.

It wasn't until he was on the bus home, still sore from physio and carrying half his weight in groceries, that he realized exactly how he knew Doctor Arum Lord.

Oh. This was bad. Oh, this was very, very bad.

Rilla could tell right away that something was wrong over dinner. Damien had outdone himself, as usual. The curry was tender and spiced just enough to accentuate the flavour (that is to say, so spicy it had once turned Angelo a shade humans should not be capable of without being literally on fire) and the rice was perfect. Still, he was too quiet. Even on his days off, he was usually thrilled to tell her about the grocery store or the status of the mysterious superhero group chat. Tonight, he was eating quietly.

"Anything interesting happen today? How was physio?"

"Not much. There was a good sale today. Angelo will probably come over for dinner tomorrow before patrol."

"That's good. Did you- "

"Yes, love. I'm making pasta."

They fell back into silence. Rilla took a bite of rice and studied Damien. Nothing was wrong, that she could tell. If it was something dangerous, he would tell her. She took another bite.

"How was your day?" Damien asked at last. He almost startled her.

"Oh! It was fascinating, actually. I'm examining the petrification of a living subject- after my work with Stone's Throw, I'm apparently the leading expert in the field. Remind me, I need to take more samples tomorrow. Arum will be glad for the research material."

"Arum?"

Rilla ducked her head. She wasn't blushing. She had nothing to blush

about. They were colleagues.

"That is, Dr. Lord. He mentioned you'd met him when you dropped off lunch?"

"Ah," said Damien, darkly. "Of course."

Rilla shifted, discomfited.

"Thanks for that, by the way. I swear, I'd forget my own head if it weren't attached."

Damien smiled.

"And I'd drop that off for you too, my love, though I think you'd have much more difficulty getting to work."

"I'm sure I'd find a way," said Rilla. "I'm very tenacious."

She smiled at Damien, who dipped his head to concede the point.

"Does Mira have you on shift tonight?"

"No," said Damien. "She, ah, thought I might do better to spend more time recovering."

"Damien," said Rilla, leveling a flat stare at her fiance. "What did you do to yourself?"

He glanced down at his arm once before he could catch himself and smiled guiltily at her.

"Nothing at all, my forever flower."

"Damien..."

"It's very minor," he said, immediately. "A tree branch got me."

"Tell me you weren't running."

"Funnily enough, I was standing still at the time."

"Well, if you're injured, then I suppose that's that then."

Damien made an inquisitive noise around a mouthful of his disgusting fortified rice (super metabolism meant that everything had to be nutrient dense and while Damien claimed to have developed a taste

for the stuff, Rilla never quite believed him).

"I had a few ideas for how we might spend your night off, but if you're incapacitated..."

Damien gulped.

"That's the end of it," she said. "Poor Damien."

Damien opened and closed his mouth, apparently speechless. Rilla grinned.

"I suppose I'll just have to take care of you," she said.

"Yes, Rilla," said Damien.

"First... she said, leaning in close and putting a hand to Damien's cheek.

"Yes?" he breathed.

"I'm thinking movie night," said Rilla, stepping back to flop on the couch and grin at Damien. He stuck his tongue out at her and Rilla laughed, delighted.

The next day in the lab, she managed to claw her way past her grogginess early enough to bring Damien toast and tea in bed before heading out to the lab with enough time to stop at the good coffee place and bring in donuts (technically, breakfast!). Today was going to be a good day.

Then she saw Arum. He looked like someone had run him over with a cement truck. As soon as he saw her, he stood up from his seat at the lab bench.

"Ah, Amaryllis. There have been further developments. Deterioration seems to have slowed with the application of yesterday's solution."

"You applied that to a living subject?"

"Our testing samples responded well to the mixture. More sampling would only delay fixing the problem."

"Arum, I know you're worried about... the subject... but you can't rush these things. Proper lab safety is absolutely crucial. Most lab accidents don't result in superpowers."

"I don't have the time to go slowly, Amaryllis. My- the subject is already weak."

"Arum..."

"Enough. We have tests to run. I've obtained more samples to examine. I don't suppose you've managed to get more samples from that moron Stone's Throw."

"I'll have them tomorrow."

"That's not soon enough," Arum hissed. He turned back to the lab desk, knocking into it and nearly sending a beaker plummeting to the ground.

"Hey Arum," said Rilla, "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"...maybe."

"Come on," she said. "I brought donuts. You can have first pick."

Arum looked at her like she'd threatened his very life.

"We don't have time."

"My foster mom always used to say," said Rilla, carefully, "that you have to let the ideas percolate, like good coffee. Maybe something will hit you."

"I really don't think-"

"And if you don't take a break, I'll hit you," she said, firmly. "Now come on, I already put the donuts out and if you don't hurry, the engineers will get at them."

"Alright," said Arum, sulking. "But only if you tell me how you actually met Stone's Throw."

Rilla snorted. In truth, she'd known Angelo for as long as she'd known Damien.

"I actually did a favour for a friend of his, and he introduced us. Not a very interesting story."

Arum shrugged, accepting the story.

The true story was not quite as dull as promised- Angelo, then a total

stranger, had brought her a bleeding man who was shaking at speeds humans should not be capable of, babbling about superconductors and particle accelerators. She had saved Damien's life and, over the course of one hell of an evening, found out more about these two strangers.

Honestly, it was like she was some sort of magnet for people with powers. Angelo, Damien, Talfryn... even Marc, depending on how you tracked things. It was nice to be with someone who was just a normal human for once.

(Beside her, Arum nudged the little break room violet closer to the window and patted it gently. It positively preened and, if Rilla had been paying attention, she would have seen it blooming where he'd touched it.)

Rilla's morning passed in relative peace as they managed to find their way back into the groove of lab work. She was in the middle of testing the newest solution- promising colour change, but limited effect on the actual calcification- when the new receptionist poked their head in.

"Sorry to interrupt-"

Arum's head whipped up and the receptionist took a nervous step back. Rilla pushed her goggles up her forehead and put up a hand.

"What is it Taylor?"

"You have a phone call, Doctor Amaryllis. It's your brother."

By the time Rilla arrived at the police office with Marc's spare chair in tow, she was angry. By the time they'd scanned the chair and brought Marc out in it, she was absolutely fuming.

The car ride was absolutely silent

“Thanks for uh, picking me up,” said Marc, awkwardly. “I really appreciate it. Tal would have come but…”

Rilla didn't look at him as she flipped on her turn signal.

“Marc…”

“I'm sorry, Rilla. I know you don't approve of the vigilante lifestyle-“

“Don't approve? Marc, you could be killed! You could fall off a building or get punched into next week! You're lucky you were just

arrested!”

“In my defense, I technically got punched backwards in time.”

“You what?!”

“Not the point, I get it. What I’m saying, Rilla, is that sometimes you have to take risks! Besides, I’m not alone out there. Tal and Dampierre are out there with me.”

“You have to be more careful, Marc.”

“You’re telling me to be careful with Damien out there every night?”

Rilla parked in the accessible parking space that didn’t have Tal’s van in it.

“Damien has training and a team supporting him. He’s out there for the good of the city.”

“Oh yeah, and I’m out there every night for the fun of it.”

“Marc, I-”

“Can you get my chair? I don’t want to leave Tal waiting.”

Rilla did as she was told, letting the subject drop. Between the two of them, they got Marc from the sensible midsize sedan to his collapsible chair. Once Marc was settled, he looked up at Rilla.

“Are you coming upstairs?”

“I really have to get back to the lab, Marc, my experiments are kinda time sensitive.”

“You aren’t the only one working there- can’t you call in a favour? Everyone’s allowed to take a break sometimes, and I’m willing to bet you skipped breakfast.”

“That’s not fair- I had most of a donut for breakfast.”

Marc shot her a look, already halfway to the elevator.

“Yeah, alright. Only if we’re getting takeout from that Chinese place down the street, though- they don’t deliver to Exile.”

“Come on, what do you take me for? I texted Tal to order the dinner

for six as soon as they gave me back my phone."

"And if I hadn't been able to come up?"

Marc shrugged. The elevator opened in front of him and they boarded.

"I knew you would. And if not, Tal and Dampierre could polish it off. The amount those two eat.. It's absolutely inhuman."

"That might have something to do with the fact that at least one of them isn't human."

"Now Rilla, don't talk about your brother that way! Talfryn's just special."

Rilla snorted despite herself. She had missed this.

Upstairs, things were exactly the same sort of chaos she'd expected. Talfryn was lying on the floor, pinned under about 150 pounds of dog with a book on swamp flora propped open in front of him. Every so often, he would gently shift the dog to turn the page. For its part, the dog was intently watching an episode of Cutthroat Kitchen on mute. When Marc crossed the threshold, both the dog and the younger brother perked up. Talfryn stood up with no concern for Dampierre's weight. For his part, Dampierre surged forward and leapt onto Marc's lap, shifting into a squirrel halfway through the jump to avoid tipping Marc backwards.

"Yeah, yeah," said Marc. "I told you I'd be alright, didn't I?"

"Only because I posted bail and got Rilla to pick you up," said Talfryn.

"I knew I could rely on you, Tal. You'll be a pretty good hero some day."

"Yeah," said Tal. "Sure."

Damien got the text right as he was stepping off the bus outside the restaurant.

BELOVED: Sorry Damien, I won't be able to make lunch- I'm baling Marc out. Again.

He answered immediately.

DAMIEN: Of course, love. Give him my best.

Then he sighed. It would be half an hour until the next bus and another twenty minutes home on top of that and he didn't have snacks. He'd have to make do.

When he joined the line-up at the little sandwich shop he and Rilla loved, he didn't spare a thought for the taller man in front of him. Mostly, he tried not to have a panic attack about ordering a sandwich. He had fought super villains in hand to hand combat for goodness sakes- why should this be any harder?

Most supervillains didn't come with a whole lineup of people to judge his choices or how long he took, though.

Damien counted his breaths carefully and tapped his hand lightly against the side of his thigh. The line shifted forward slightly. Damien tried to shift with it, but misjudged and bumped into the tall figure in front of him.

"So sorry," he mumbled.

"Yes, well, be more careful next time- Damien?"

Damien looked up, startled.

"It is Damien, isn't it?"

Damien finally registered who he was looking at and immediately went through all five stages of grief simultaneously.

"Uh, yes, yes. Damien. That's me."

"We met a few days ago, I'm not sure if you remember, tktk- uh, I'm Doctor Arum Lord."

"Certainly, " said Damien distantly. "It's lovely to see you again, friend Arum."

Arum looked taken aback.

"Small world, then," he said, turning back toward the sandwich board awkwardly. Damien shook his head and came back to his senses.

"How is Rilla? I'm afraid I didn't see her this morning."

"Oh yes, your not-exactly-a girlfriend. She's an excellent scientist, you know."

"She is, isn't she? A very capable woman."

It took him a second to process the odd phrasing.

"Say,- "

"So, what is it you do?" said Arum, half a beat ahead of him.

"I'm a security guard," said Damien. "Shift work, mostly. Working wherever we're needed."

"An interesting job for an interesting man," said Arum. "I wouldn't have taken you for the type."

"I suppose neither of us is quite what we seem," said Damien.

Before Arum could say anything, he'd reached the front of the line. By the time Damien had made it through in turn (panic attack successfully averted by the actual supervillain), the other man had disappeared completely.

Lunch passed quickly at the Smith house. With Rilla around, Tal could almost ignore the tension. Dampierre had better chopstick skills than any of them, despite his habitual lack of thumbs. Talfryn finished the last of the noodles as Rilla quietly pulled Marc aside. He ignored their conversation as best he could, although he could still hear it even through two and a half walls. Perks of his particular situation.

"Your line of work doesn't have health insurance, Marc, and Tal's isn't much better. You can't keep doing this."

"I know, Rilla. I'll- I'll be more careful."

Talfryn tried to shift his focus. Next door, Mrs. Valdez was humming while she put away dishes. Two floors down, baby Amelia was finally down for her nap and her mother was hoping to finally fold some laundry. In the lobby, the mailman cursed at a paper cut. Three floors up, a cat was batting a squeaky toy around the apartment. Four floors up-

Talfryn stood up abruptly. He set his plate by the sink with vague plans to put things away later and put on his ear defenders. He sat in

his chair carefully and tried to focus on his book again.

Swamps are considered to be a sort of transitional ecosystem, as both water and land play an essential role in their formation. They can be found around the world and as such have an incredible diversity of life. Swamps are both biodiverse and enormously biodense. As an ecosystem that functions partially to completely submerged (and often transitions between the two states), the flora in swamps must be equally adaptable. Take the example of a lizard…

Not long after Talfryn had sat down, Rilla ruffled his hair lightly. He smiled at her as she left. In the kitchen, Marc and Dampierre were cleaning up- Marc was loading the dishwasher and Dampierre was licking out the takeout containers before handing them over. Things were at least a little bit normal, for once. It took about ten minutes for things to become even more normal as Marc wheeled his way into the living room and stopped facing Talfryn. Tal ignored him for all of a page and a half before finally looking up.

"So," said Marc, faux-casually. "Did you bring the gear back?"

Talfryn sighed and marked his page with his state plants bookmark. He set his book and his ear defenders on the coffee table next to a small flotilla of mugs.

"I don't think this is a good idea," he said. Marc only waited. Talfryn sighed. "Yeah, I brought the gear back."

"Great. I got a tip off in the cells from some MONSTER goons about some kind of big thing going down tonight, we're gonna need everything in working order."

"Tonight? Marc, you were just arrested!"

"Sure, but that just means I know the intel's good. No one there knew they were holding me on suspicion of vigilantism. Besides, who'd suspect the guy in the state-issued wheelchair?"

Talfryn didn't say anything.

"Oh come on, Tal. They need us out there! The heroes don't even know this is coming. We can beat CROWN to the punch- literally!"

Talfryn sighed and stood up.

"What's the tip?"

"There's some kind of gathering tonight for a very particular set of MONSTER personnel. The type with money to throw around an appreciation for strong arms and a nice set of abs."

"Huh?"

"Girls, Tal. You know, curvy, smell nice, fun to be around?"

Talfryn shrugged. By now, they were in the back bedroom. Officially, it was Marc's. In practice it was more of a workshop than anywhere someone might actually live.

"I know what girls are. I just have other things to think about."

"Like what? Swamp creatures?"

"Your vigilantism, mostly. Come on, your gear will need a full work-up if we're going out tonight."

"Whatever you say, Tal."

Their patrol started out almost innocuously. They were both on the ground, for once, and both in full costume, too, albeit in costumes with just enough plausible deniability to pass as street clothes. It was just starting to get cold in the Citadel and Tal had never been so glad for his tactical hoodie (Marc had tried for a cooler name, but it was Talfryn's costume and he didn't even want to be here, so Talfryn got to name it himself). Talfryn was walking carefully, keeping his ears open for any suspiciously criminal sounds. Beside him, Marc's rig rolled since they were on the streets, but the hover-jets were still in the ready position.

"Ma- uh,Tinker, are you sure it's this way? This part of town gives me a bad feeling."

"Sure as anything. My tip came straight from MONSTER elites."

"Really?"

"Well, a couple of grunts in the holding cell, but still. It's good information."

"I-"

"Don't worry about it. We'll be fine."

They kept walking. The little suburb they were in could hardly be

called part of Citadel City- four more blocks and they'd be into farmland and swamps. Marc scratched Dampierre idly behind the ears as his rig kept up to Tal automatically. Apologizing silently, he pressed a button on his armrest. His hover jets blasted once. They weren't loud, but they made enough noise to keep Tal distracted for the split second it took to clip the leash to Dampierre's collar. Unlike the collar itself, the leash was mundane. Mostly.

"So, how's the swamp book?"

“It’s really interesting so far. Did you know there was once a plan to release hippos into the Mississippi river? The plan was to create an easy source of meat for people suffering under the Great Depression.”

“I didn’t realize the Mississippi was a swamp,” said Marc.

“Well, it isn’t really, but it has some tributaries and calmer areas, and it definitely connects to swamps!”

"Interesting," said Marc. He nodded at Dampierre, who slowed down his trot and peeled off. "Say, Tal, are you really still reading that?"

"Yes, why? You can borrow it when I'm done if you like, but I'll have to ask Mrs. Jenkins to renew it."

"No, I don't- Tal, you could finish the book faster than Arrow can cross town. Why aren't you?"

"I don't think I could really be faster than Arrow, or at least not if I wanted to understand what I was reading."

"Not the point, Tal."

Talfryn shrugged.

"I don't know. Sometimes, it's nice to take your time and actually- "

A clatter from the small row of shops across the street interrupted Tal and they both took off as quickly as possible. Talfryn, focused forward, missed the so-called Salamander's knowing grin.

When they finally made their way around the pizza place and behind the make-you-own-wine store, the situation was chaos. Something made of heavy grey stone had flattened a tremendous dent into the side of the dumpster and was now hanging out. illegal dumping wasn't exactly unusual. This particular strange rock also seemed to be

wearing glittery red boots, though, which was less than normal. There was also some sort of muttering.

"g'ffme! Sto-oof!" The stone hero shifted, squishing more firmly down onto the navy blue leggings that had begun kicking frantically.

"Tinker, should we- "

"Now Tal, these are some of the Citadel's finest heroes! I'm sure they wouldn't need the help of a pair of vigilantes."

"Just one moment, friend Arrow! I'll have us free!"

"Stone, that's my SPLEEN, you can't- aaah!"

"Hold STILL, Arrow, we're nearly there."

"Uh, pardon me," said Tal, wavering. "Do you need help?"

"What? Stone, no-!"

"Do you need help?" said Talfryn, louder.

"Please!"

Talfryn looked at Marc, who sighed.

"Fine."

Five minutes later, things were not better. Sure, the superhero Arrow (somehow pulling off neon yellow goggles while Marc could barely get away with even one colour) was in somewhat less danger of suffocation, but now the odds were much higher that Marc would have to kill the guy himself.

"You! Did! Not! Invent! The! Net!"

"No, but I did invent the molecular condensation that let me save your life! Without me, you'd still be under a ton of granite!”

"I weigh far less than a ton, friend Salamander," said Stone's Throw, helpfully. “And your henchman helped! He was able to lift me easily.”

“Not a henchman,” said Talfryn.

"Don't call me that!" cried Marc, ignoring him completely.

“Really? It fits you so well, though, with your *tricks* ,” spat Damien.

“I’m just as much a hero as either of you!”

“Are you now? That’s news to me.”

Talfryn raised his hand.

"Uh, Marc?"

"Tal, I told you, we have to use- "

"Marc, I really think-"

"Tal, you-"

An ear-splitting scream shattered the argument.

"That," said Talfryn.

"Which way?”

Talfryn pointed down the street.

“Perfect. First to save the civilians?”

“Indeed.”

Marc was gone before Damien even finished speaking, switching to hover jets and blasting off into the night. Damien was half a heartbeat behind him and accelerating quickly.

Talfryn looked at Stone’s Throw, who shrugged.

“Come, my young friend! A hero can never hesitate!”

“I- yeah, fine.”

The two jogged off, easily keeping pace at a jog faster than most people could sprint. Dampierre caught up easily and Talfryn shot him a sideways look. If a miniature pony in full gallop could shrug innocently, Dampierre certainly did.

The sight that greeted them when they finally reached the source of the scream would haunt any sensible person. As it was, the four superheroes could only freeze.

In front of them, the doors to the 'Mangrove Community Hall' were

wide open, revealing a room done in warm, generic wood that was probably well worn in the early 2000s. Talfryn logged the details almost automatically. They made their way carefully into the sagging hall. In the entryway was a girl in some sort of green uniform who screamed again when she saw them.

"You're here! I told you they'd come!"

"I'm sorry, miss," said Arrow, gently. "Did you need help?"

"You're just in time!"

Before anyone could do anything, she darted forward and took Arrow by the hand, dragging him into the worn fluorescent shadows. Marc switched to manual, following carefully. Talfryn took a look around the empty parking lot before reluctantly joining the group already inside the hall.

As he entered, a circle of girls in identical green and blue uniforms turned towards him in unison. Their insignia said Nymphs. Their eyes said they would be as interested in a class on scrapbooking as they would seeing the inside of the human body live and in person.

"Ladies and more ladies," said the girl who had dragged Arrow in by the hand and was still holding him by the wrist. "Our guests are here!"

The group broke out into cheers and applause, buzzing with gossip.

"Stone's Throw is so cool!"

"I can't believe Arrow-"

"Look at the dog!"

"Who's that guy?"

"Who cares?"

The young woman at the front cleared her throat, once. Instantly, the girls quieted down.

"Do you young ladies have a group leader?" asked Stone's Throw. "I really don't think-"

"That's alright! This group is Peer Lead and you don't have to do much thinking here. Sophie, if you could..."

"Absolutely!"

The group of girls set into movement, unstacking chairs from against the walls and setting them out in careful rows. There was something almost unsettling about their movements. It might have been the uniforms, but the way they moved around each other in careful lines of alternating green and blue bucket hats and carried the chairs in exactly the same way was unsettlingly familiar. Before he could place it, though, their host spoke up. In the meantime, she had been joined by another young woman who looked about the same age.

"Alright! Welcome to our meeting! My name is Sunny-"

"-and I'm Paige! The way that this works is pretty simple, isn't it Sunny?"

"That's right! We have here a very official hat-" she paused to pull a beat up red baseball hat from a side table pull of red slips of paper- "and all you guys have to do is go with it! And don't worry, there's a prize. For the winners, at least!"

Damien opened his mouth. Before he could, both Sunny and Paige were both gone. The young woman who had been identified as Sophie led them to four folding chairs at the back of the group and smiled before vanishing back into the group. Marc pulled up beside the end of the row and gestured for Tal to sit beside him.

"Ladies and more ladies, welcome to our meeting!"

The group cheered loudly. Paige quieted them by clearing her throat lightly.

"Now, before we start, please stand for the Nymph Pledge."

As the group recited something about 'sisterhood and damselhood, remaining as one', Tal leaned towards Marc.

"I don't like this…"

"Oh come on Tal, you were a boy scout once. This is a community organization!"

"Meeting at 9:00 at night? With no adults in sight?"

"A weird community organization, then."

At the other end of the row, Stone's Throw perched carefully on the

floor. He didn't dent it, but he did incline the floor ever so slightly in his direction.

“Where were you?” hised Arrow.

“They wanted to know our code names,” murmured Stone’s Throw. Arrow nodded. The group continued their pledge, swearing to ‘uphold the Nymph’s commitment to liberty and fair play’- it was quite the long pledge.

“Stay vigilant, Stone. They’re still with MONSTER.”

“Yes… though, I do find it hard to believe that anyone who organizes such a diligent meeting could be evil. Perhaps they’re like the crocodile hound experiment- just pawns caught up in something over their head. They may not even know what they’re associated with.”

“I suppose…”

“I’d like to introduce everyone to our guests tonight. Please, give them a warm Nymphs welcome! On one team, we have the Incredible Arrow and the towering Stone’s Throw, both renowned heroes. And our underdogs, vigilantes and brothers to each other, the Salamander aaaand Tall Lad!”

The group cheered loudly, startling both pairs.

“Now, you all know how this works,” said Paige. “My friend Sunny here is going to draw two Positive Possibilities. These two teams will each send up one person for each Possibility. The winner will go on to the Final Round and could! Win! Prizes!”

The group cheered again. Someone threw her hat in the air and there was a brief scuffle to reunite her with it.

“I don’t like this, Ma-Tinker. I really don’t like this.”

“It’ll be fine! Besides, when we win, we’ll be able to hold it against those smug a- uh, jerks for the next twenty years. Come on, where’s your sense of adventure?”

“For our first event…”

The entire group of girls started drumming on their knees, filling the hall with a droning sort of pattering. "Campfire stories! Tell me Paige, do you know any fire safety rules?"

"I sure do, Sunny. Stay back from the fire, and no one gets burnt! And remember, it's important to always tell the truth."

The two hosts laughed. Talfryn shuddered.

"And finally, we have... single combat!"

The Nymphs cheered.

“Single combat?” asked Arrow, incredulously.

Paige pointed dramatically. At the other end of the hall, a pair of sticks with chunks of foam on the end were piled up with appropriate protective equipment.

“Now… competitors, you have two minutes to decide who’s doing what! Timestartsnow!”

Things went downhill from there.

Damien had the entire troup hanging off of his every word, sitting around the startlingly realistic fire in the middle of the hall.

“I don’t know any good stories!”

“Can’t you make something up, ‘Tall Lad’?”

“No! And stop smirking- I didn’t pick it!”

“Look, here’s what I want you to do: stand in front of the group and say ‘Once Upon A Time, in the streets of the Citadel’ and then say whatever comes into your head. You’ve got this!”

Next to the fire, Damien’s story was drawing to a close.

“And then, after this long and hard fight, I finally opened the door and do you know what I found, lurking inside the biggest, tallest, scariest mech suit I’d ever seen?”

“No!”

“What did you find?”

“What was in there?”

“Five little grey kittens, batting at the controls!”

“Wooaaaaaah.”

When Talfryn’s turn came up, he stood in front of the fire. It looked and even felt *real* - what kind of tech were these kids working with?

“Uh, hi, everyone. My name is, uh, Tall Lad.”

The group shifted and murmured.

“Once upon a time in the streets of the Citadel…. What does that even mean? Once upon a time? It doesn’t make any sense- you can’t be upon time. It’s not even a real thing! Um. Thank you.”

The group blinked. Outside, Talfryn could literally hear crickets.

“An excellent effort from Tall Lad! Let’s give him a big hand, everyone,” said Sunny, smiling too broadly. The group clapped dutifully. Talfryn gulped.

“It’s alright, pal,” said Paige, suddenly beside him. “Let’s get you a juicebox.”

She took him by the forearm and dragged him off into the dark kitchen beside the hall before he could say anything.

Marc and Angelo battled ferociously with foam gladiators at the top of a simulated cliff (“I want to thank the community for this incredible donation: an old holoprojector that the Judge gifted to the Nymph organization! It really livens up the meetings, doesn’t it Paige?” “It sure does, Sunny. It sure does.”).

“Your seated position may prove an advantage, Salamander, but it may also prove… your defeat!”

Stone’s Throw lunged forward, swinging his gladiator like a baseball bat. Marc leaned so far back he was nearly horizontal and, on the backswing, caught the foam tip of Stone’s Thow’s weapon with his own and twisted, pulling the stone behemoth off balance. Before he could restabilize, Marc lunged forward. Stone’s Throw took a single, teetering step back off his platform, shaking the hall.

“Well played, Salamander!”

“Do me a favour,” said Marc, as the Nymphs applauded. “Never call me that again.”

“What is your name to be then, friend S- friend?”

“Call me Tinker.”

Marc grinned as the Nymphs cheered. It was nice while it lasted.

The rest of the evening went rapidly downhill. Damien and Marc competed in the Nymph Agility Course. It started off with hula hoops and hockey sticks and ended with swinging knives. (“And are those real knives, Paige?” “It all depends, Sunny. Here’s hoping our big strong heroes don’t have to find out!”)

“Tinker! The nice scouts aren’t nice scouts! They’re a hive mi- erk!”

When the two thirteen year olds managed to restrain the two strongmen, things started to happen very quickly.

At the end of it all, after they’d defeated the very large bug that their contests had summoned, the four heroes were left standing in front of the mostly-destroyed hall. Nymph scouts scattered into the minivans and sensible SUVs that had appeared outside the hall, forming into carpools and siblings. In the suburban street lit darkness, the headlights were blinding; it was impossible to tell who was behind the wheel, if anyone. Paige and Pitley were crying tears that, on closer inspection, appeared to be bees.

“I can’t believe we lozzzzzzt it!”

“Thozzzze horrible piggiezz must have zzztolen our holoprojjjjector!”

Stone’s Throw put a hand on their shoulders and cleared his throat. Before he could do anything more than take a breath, both preteens dissolved into a cloud of insects and flew away.

“Saints!” exclaimed Stone’s Throw, falling backwards and cracking the concrete where he landed. Arrow extended a hand to him and Stone’s Throw stood, dusting himself off gingerly.

“Winter Knight,” said Talfryn, “is going to kill us.”

Everyone nodded. The hall itself had a very prominent hole in the wall, through which Talfryn could easily see scorch marks and acid erosion.

“My friends, Arrow and I must file a report and see the repairs done,” said Stone’s Throw. He paused, heavily. “I’m certain that if you were to leave now, none of the Nymphs would be likely to contradict our report.”

“What?” asked Talfryn.

“On our patrol, we met a group of MONSTER agents who had broken in to try out some new technology,” said Damien, almost apologetically. “These miscreants had the audacity to hide amongst an innocent group of scouts. We evacuated the hall, but the agents... objected to being detected. The resulting fight did significant damage to the hall, but no civilians were hurt. The hall will be rebuilt from our community wellness fund and no doubt, the community as a whole will benefit.”

Tinker nodded. Talfryn opened his mouth but closed it again when Dampierre-the-squirrel landed on his shoulder.

“And Marc? Be safe out there.”

“Rilla wouldn’t forgive me if I got Tal hurt,” said Marc, grinning under his mask.

They were close, Rilla knew it. They'd been working on this project exclusively for nearly a week. Arum had still refused to let her see the actual patient (and she knew it was a plant, too, which only made the whole thing more interesting). Between Arum's obsession and Angelo's samples (chipped gently from his left forearm and then drawn carefully from a vein in the same arm with a needle made out of surgical grade carbon steel), they had a cure that would work on nearly all samples. It was that last 2% that were driving them around the bend. They'd been running tests on this one batch for nearly four hours now without any kind of break.

"Think about it- is there anything at all, no matter how ridiculous, that makes this sample different from any of the others?"

"It's... older, I suppose," said Arum, begrudgingly.

"Do you mean it's older growth? Or has it been petrified longer?"

"Neither, both, what does it matter? Tktktktktktk."

"It matters because if I don't know what's different, I can't fix this!"

"Well if you can't fix this, I don't see why we're bothering! None of this science is going to fix her!"

"I can't work without information!"

"It seems like you can't do much of anything, Amaryllis! What we have now will have to suffice- I can't wait any longer."

"Arum, you can't-"

"Oh, can't I?"

"Fine. At least let me bottle this, then. We should add some kind of stabilizing agent too, to keep it viable for longer."

"If you must. I have a phone call to make."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Arum stepped out into the hallway. Rilla could feel angry tears prickling her eyes,which only made her more frustrated.

"Why won't he just listen? Honestly! Men."

She rummaged through chemical storage and breathed. As she searched, she started to hum almost thoughtlessly. She'd gotten used to having a lab partner, but old habits were hard to break.

When Arum came back into the room, he froze in the doorway. Rilla stopped stirring the mixture and looked up.

"I'm sorry, was I humming? I lost track of things- I can stop."

"I... was wondering if you still wanted to see the subject?"

"Really? That would be- I mean, that would be incredible."

"Fantastic. Shall we?"

"Right now?"

"Can you think of a better time?"

"Fair enough," said Rilla. "Let me just text Damien- it's date night."

"Ah yes," Arum answered. There was something odd in the way he

spoke. “Date night. Of course. I’d… hate to interrupt.”

The drive was longer than she'd anticipated.The silence that hung between them seemed impermeable. Arum didn't have a car, so she was driving both of them. He'd refused an address, instead directing her out past city limits and into the swamp on the edge of town. The Swamp of Titan's bloom wasn't the sight of any school field trips or the subject of any serious preservation efforts- no one wanted the darn thing. Residue from the old Supplice Chemical factory shut down in the 70s leached into the groundwater and made the entire place completely uninhabitable.

"Arum, if you've brought me out here to kill me, this won't end well," she said, only half joking.

"Park here," he said, indicating the creepiest parking lot Rilla had ever seen in her entire life. The old factory seemed to be leaning towards them as they got out of the car. It looked… hungry.

"Arum..."

"I'm sorry about this," he said.

"What? Oh!"

Arum pressed a cloth to her face. It smelled floral and almost like...

"Honeysuckle?" she mumbled, before her knees gave out. The last thing she felt was a set of surprisingly strong arms catching before she could do more than begin to fall.

When she woke up, she was lying on something soft. Her head felt muzzy, but it didn't ache and she didn't feel sick. She didn't open her eyes but instead took a careful inventory of her body and her surroundings. She got up to her elbows before she heard the voices. It sounded like someone... singing?

"I know, but- she’s awake? Already?"

She felt the air in the room shift.

"I know you're awake, Amaryllis. You can open your eyes. I... have no ill-intent towards you."

Rilla opened her eyes. The room she was in was dimly lit, but not unpleasant. The walls were a delicate green, with a pattern like...

"Leaves?"

Arum chuckled.

"Something like that."

"Arum, this place is incredible."

Now that she was looking, Rilla could see that what she had taken for lamplight was actually bioluminescence. Even the bed she was sitting on was made from plant materials. As she marveled, the singing began again.

"Oh, stop it," said Arum. "You'll only inflate the Keep's ego."

"The Keep?"

ARum hesitated. The singing started again with a handful of gentle, lightly mocking notes. Rilla realized suddenly that the walls themselves seemed to be singing.

"Welcome," he said, awkwardly, "to my home. The Keep, deep in the heart of the swamp of Titan's Bloom. There's not a human alive who knows how to find their way here."

"But..."

"I may not be, ah, strictly speaking... human? Or at least, not completely. Tktktk."

Arum looks supremely uncomfortable. Rilla took pity on him.

"So," she said, standing up. "This is our patient. Can you take me to the site of the petrification?"

They spent hours testing their remedies. Everything about the Keep was fascinating, from the way it moved down to the sheer variety of structures contained within.

"I'd love to get a living specimen under a microscope," she said, staring intently at the boundaries of a particular petrified patch. Beside her, Arum tensed.

"I can't allow that. Amaryllis, after today, you can never return here. Please."

He sounded like the world was ending around him.

"Arum, I-"

"Please."

"Alright. For now. But this isn't the end of the conversation."

Arum huffed but let the conversations end. The Keep hummed and moved around them and above all else, the place seemed to be full of light and life in a way that nowhere else she'd ever been could even begin to imagine. Still, it became clear as they worked that things were not going well.

"No, no, not that. I need you to- please I know, you just have to try, Keep. You just have to try."

Once again, it was singing that broke through the boundaries. A shared lullaby from years ago finally lulled the Keep to sleep and, ultimately, towards healing. That meant, though, that she and Arum were trapped.

"Can I have my phone at least? Just to text Damien and let him know that I'm alright."

"It's in your car, I'm afraid. It's just 4 now, though, he won't be expecting you yet."

"Alright," said Rilla. "I suppose we'll just have to keep ourselves entertained."

Arum coughed.

"Ah, yes, I suppose so."

"So, you're... not human?"

Arum looked surprised again.

"Not... entirely."

"So the Keep's like your mom."

"My Keep is the complex, interconnected consciousness of the entire swamp. It could never be summarized as something so... reductive! Tktktktktk."

Rilla snorted.

"If you say so."

They sat in silence for a moment longer.

“So if you’re not human, what are you? If I can ask.”

Arum waved a hand dismissively.

“Why should I care? I’m still, partly human, with a good amount of plant and…”

“And?”

“...about 3% lizard by volume,” he mumbled.

Rilla’s laughter nearly woke the Keep up.

When Rilla finally made it back to her car, still parked in the creepy parking lot that sunset was *not at all improving* , Arum lingered awkwardly for a moment.

"Amaryllis..."

"Please, call me Rilla. If we aren’t friends after all that…”

Arum took a deep breath.

"Rilla... I wanted to thank you. Working with you, and what you've done for my Keep- I couldn't have done to myself. So."

"I'm glad to help," said Rilla. It felt woefully short of what she meant.

"Goodbye, Amaryllis. I won't be seeing you again."

He took a few steps away before Rilla got it together enough to stop him.

"Arum?"

He turned.

"Take care of yourself."

Arum nodded and then disappeared into the roots of a dandelion that had broken through a crack in the pavement, which was a whole other thing she would have to learn to deal with. Apparently, she wasn't

allowed to have any connections that were just normal human people. Then again, though, she wouldn't know a normal human person if she met them and probably wouldn't trust one if she did.

Still, it was already time for her to meet Damien and she was still at least half an hour out of town. Delightful. She pulled out her phone to text Damien.

AMARYLLIS: Hey Damien, just letting you know I'll be a little late. Got caught in an experiment, I'll meet you at home. Rain check on date night?

???: Aw, babe,that's adorable! U text like my lola. i'll let him kno

AMARYLLIS: Who is this?

???: A friend

???: duck

Rilla, sister to vigilantes and fiancee to a superhero, ducked immediately. The back window of her car shattered and a blast of freezing cold air filled the car.

"Come out with your hands up!"

"What?"

"I won't ask again!"

Rilla stepped out of the car.

She'd expected MONSTER goons. She wouldn't have been surprised to find the mundane police- this wasn't exactly the least suspicious place in the world. Some kind of swamp monster would have been surprising. What she actually found was nothing she would have ever expected.

"Caroline?"

The Winter Knight didn't even blink, not that it would have been visible behind her goggles and hood. She still had her fist extended from the ice blast that had shattered the window.

"Are you resisting?"

"What? No! What am I even supposed to be resisting?"

"Doctor Amaryllis, you're being brought into custody for conspiracy to sell technology to MONSTER and for consorting with Doctor Arum Lord, a known criminal and conspirator with the same organization. Do you dispute the charges?"

"Yes? I didn't- I would never sell technology! I've been at Queen's for more than three years and I've never done anything like that!"

"Very well. Please understand that this is not an arrest- upon return to the jurisdiction of the Citadel PD, you will be surrendered into their custody for booking, at which point you will have access to a lawyer for further explanation of the charges. Do you understand?"

"No! Not at all!"

The Winter's Knight took Rilla by the wrist so tightly that it ached.

"Whenever you're ready," she said.

"What?"

"Not. You."

Rilla blinked and the world became reflected and distorted. She could see the Winter Knight from every angle. She could see the back of her own head and wow that was disorienting and did her braid really look like that? Even her thoughts seemed to loop around themselves and reflect. Before she collapsed, though, she caught the faintest glimpse of blue light out of the corner of her eye and heard- typing?

They came suddenly. Arum had made his way back to the Keep when he felt the boots on the ground outside the factory. He didn't make a habit of keeping his awareness quite that open, but his labs were one thing he needed to keep an eye on at all times. He knew these steel-toed boots like he knew the feeling of a dagger sliding between his ribs.

Porkus and Trotter knew him well enough that they didn't even startle when he sprouted in front of them.

"What is it? I've paid off my debt for this month and I've no intention of paying more than what I owe. Do you really need more of my creations so early?"

Then he noticed the empty car in the parking lot, back window shattered and the twin grins on the two enforcers' faces.

"What have you done to her?"

"Her?" asked Porkus. Trotter elbowed him violently.

"Nothing too bad. Yet." He elbowed his compatriot again. The other man squealed.

"You're coming with us."

"Why? What- ?"

"Not another- not another word! Unless you want there to be consequences!"

The two men were much stronger than Arum, but he could have found his way out of the situation. He had his knives with him and he could always run deeper into the swamp. But if they followed him and found the Keep, sick and sleeping? And if they really had Amaryllis?

"Very well," he said. The two goons squealed and laughed as Arum swallowed a growing sinking feeling in his gut.

Caroline's night was not going well. It had not started well, honestly, but things were only going downhill. In her ear, Mira was nearly frantic.

"Caroline? My Knight? Where are you?"

Caroling looked around. They were somewhere in the industrial area of town- she could see several large, looming buildings, a sensible chain coffee shop and a long stretch of empty parking lot.

"I'm... not certain. I think we're in the industrial district, but I can't be certain."

"I can't- You need to find more information, Winter's Knight. With the suspect-"

"The civilian is well within my control, Mirror."

"The civilian can hear you!" added Rilla, helpfully. Caroline would STRANGLE her.

"Mirror, please. I'll determine our location and report back as soon as I

can."

"Sooner, if you can," said Mirror. "We're holding things together here, but I don't know how long we can keep this up."

"Are we- " Caroline glanced at the civilian and stepped to the side.

"We're in an empty parking lot- I can definitely still hear you," said Rilla, wandering back towards her.

"You stay there if you don't want your shoes frozen to the ground."

Rilla raised her hands and leaned back against the single lamp post in the middle of the parking lot. Caroline glared at her, deliberately lowering the temperature a few degrees around her before stepping away.

"Mirror, are we under attack? What's going on?"

"This line isn't safe," said Mirror. "I can't say much more. We'll be fine here for now, for as long as we can be. Be safe out there, Caroline. I'll talk to you again when I again."

"Mirror, I-"

The line went dead and Caroline swore.

"Oh come on babe, don't be like that," a different voice entirely pouted into her ear.

"Not now," she hissed.

"You know you missed me."

"Look, I really can't-"

"But then, I suppose I'm not the only thing you're missing, am I?"

"You didn't."

"Toodles!"

"Sorceress!"

Caroline pulled her communicator out of her ear, leaving it to dangle and turned to find Rilla, predictably, gone.

"Damn damn double damn," she muttered, because superheroes definitely weren't allowed to swear. "Scientist? Where did you go?"

There was no response.

"I'm informing you now that you are now officially a fugitive, and I will use any level of force I deem appropriate to bring you in!"

The parking lot had never looked emptier. Caroline put her earpiece back in.

"Alright, where is she?"

"Where's the fun in that, silly?"

"Not. The. Time."

"Alright, fiiiiine. She'd never really leave you behind, you know."

Caroline didn't even respond, but instead spun on her heel and sprinted towards the door to the warehouse behind her. It was, of course, locked, but that wasn't hard to fix. She shot it so full of ice that it shattered of its own accord and kicked down the door.

The scientist spun on her approach.

"Sshhhh! There could be people here!" she hissed.

"I already know there's at least one criminal," said Caroline.

"You called me a civilian earlier," said Rilla, without looking up from the locker she was foraging through.

"We're leaving."

"Look, Winter Knight- can I just call you Winter? It seems much simpler."

"No."

"Winter Knight, then- this place was unlocked and I'd swear I heard voices earlier. Plus-" she pulled a plain black domino mask triumphantly from the locker- "These are MONSTER issued. I'd know them anywhere."

"How would you know?"

"I work with so many heroes," said Rilla, putting on the mask . "I'd be in a lot of trouble if I didn't."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Caroline, before she could help herself.

"I told her where she could find her lizard love," cackled a voice in her ear. Rilla only shrugged as she stepped into the Men's XL jumpsuit she'd pulled from the locker in front of her.

Winter Knight put a hand firmly on her shoulder and stopped her.

"I'll take that- you should find something more suited to you."

Winter Knight stopped herself from commenting further, which gave her enough time to realize something.

"Why are you doing this, anyways? You're not a hero, and you're not the type to turn vigilante."

"Oh, uh, I think Arum mentioned something about this. You said he's with MONSTER, so it only stands to reason."

"You didn't know that Doctor Lord was with MONSTER until less than five minutes ago and now you're suddenly an expert?"

Someone snickered in Caroline's ear and it was everything she could do not to roll her eyes.

"Hand that over," she said, snatching the jumpsuit from Rilla's hand. "We should hurry."

Rilla looked relieved- honestly, had the woman never heard of a poker face? It was a miracle she wasn't kidnapped more often. When Rilla had turned away, Winter Knight pulled on a balaclava and froze her helmet into a locker.

They crept into the meeting after some kind of coffee break, taking a seat at a table at the back with a man in a balaclava who introduced himself as Dale. Denying all the laws of probability, it was not at all an interesting meeting. The assembled group spent nearly half an hour on by-law renegotiation and discussions of the administrative council, complete with a neatly organized agenda. It would have been easy to mistake the affair for some kind of corporate conference if not for the masks and the fact that there were itemized line items for 'civilian casualties' and 'administrative bribes'. "Are you sure we're meant to be

here?" the Winter Knight hissed to Rilla through her balaclava. Rilla shrugged.

"Probably?"

Dale cleared his throat significantly. At the front of the room, a portly gentleman in a suit and tie that were sized for someone half his size and a black domino mask was reading a list of by-law variations (apparently, the henchman had tried to unionize- tried being the operative word).

"Look, we just need to-"

"A-hem!" said Dale.

"Look, we're a little busy here," muttered the Winter Knight.

"I say-!"

"No, you don't," said Caroline. "Listen to the meeting."

When they finally brought the scientist out, things changed quickly. This wasn't a criminal court. There was no facade of justice. Just the accusation read in a flat voice. Doctor Lord had a black eye that had already started to green and his nose was sitting at an angle that it was certainly not meant to. He looked broken by any measure of the word.

"Doctor Arum Lord has betrayed this organization and the very principles upon which it was founded. As such, it is not merely enough for him to disappear. No, this man will serve as a lesson. The punitive committee is deciding his punishment as we speak- the only question is how quick to make it, ha ha."

The rest of the group broke out into polite laughter, snickering and at least one evil cackle. The whole thing set Winter Knight's teeth on edge. The worst part, by far, though, was the civilian. Rilla was on the edge of her seat and what could be seen of her face was decided un-villainous.

"Laugh," hissed the Winter's Knight.

"What?"

"Laugh!"

Rilla burst into obviously fake laughter just a beat too late, drawing

glares and yet more harumphing from their table-mate. The Winter Knight almost missed the shock of realization when the evil scientist caught sight of who was laughing. There was something too familiar in the way his eyes were fearful and soft at once. She didn't like it.

Before she had time to address the situation further or do more than glare daggers at Dale, the doctor spouted off about flowers and weapons before being dragged away.

"I'm just getting notice now of a new development in the case," said the meeting leader. "The committee has come to an accord on the results of this case. Tomorrow, at dawn, the scientist will be returned to his swamp."

He paused, just for a moment. The room seemed to deflate. Rilla actually looked relieved. Winter Knight wasn't quite so naive.

"The nearby chemical plant is being prepared now- it seems that the old chemical plant was never properly cleaned up, after the accident. Everyone knows that chemicals have been leeching into the groundwater for decades, now. There have been dozens of proposals to clean things up, before tragedy strikes. Unfortunately, it seems that they won't be fast enough to save the old eyesore from going out with a bang, hum hum."

The room broke out into cheering and applause. There was only one dissenting voice.

"No!"

"I beg your pardon?"

The whole room went dead quiet as they looked around for the disturbance in their midst. Winter Knight was incensed to realize who it was who had spoken, though it wasn't a surprise.

"You've disturbed this meeting more than enough!" said Dale, chin wobbling furiously. "I charge you with violating Bylaws 3-b and c and 4-f!"

Winter Knight ground one steel-toed combat-boot down onto Dale's foot under the table.

"If you say anything else, you'll be hopping out of here."

"You just threatened me. She just threatened me! That's a violation of

bylaw number 1! Security!"

The goons who had been creeping towards them accelerated quickly. Caroline felt her hands clench into fists but before she could do anything, a frantic voice buzzed in her ear.

"You have to be Caroline, babe. Anything else and-"

The nearest goon pulled her balaclava off, taking the earpiece with it. He took one look at her and snorted a laugh.

"Lookit this! It's just a girlie!"

He leaned in close enough that she could smell garlic on his breath.

"You gonna fight, girlie? I like it when they fight."

Caroline (and she had to be Caroline if she was going to survive, which was probably the best part) snarled at him, but didn't put up a fight.

"I don't know where she could be," said Damien, pacing around Exile's living room at a speed most people would consider a solid sprint.

"I'm glad you called me, friend Damien," said Angelo. He was in human form, sitting cross-legged on the couch. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"I saw her this morning but- oh, Angelo, I didn't say anything to her! I slept late and when I woke up she was on her way out the door. She kissed me on the forehead and then dashed away. I didn't tell her I love her and- what f I never get the chance to?"

Damien could feel himself starting to spiral but before he had the chance, Angelo stood up with grace that a part-time rock shouldn't have and wrapped him a tight hug.

"Breathe with me, Damien. We'll find her. You'll see her again. It wouldn't be the first time she's been kidnapped."

"You think she'd been kidnapped?"

"No! Not at all! I merely meant that she's used to it, at this point."

"And it's all my fault! I'm the one who dragged her into this world and

I'm the reason she keeps getting hurt like this. She would be better off without me!"

"Nonsense! You know that isn't true and if Rilla were here, she'd agree with me. Her research into me is responsible for at least half of the kidnappings."

"Rillaaaa!"

"None of that, now," said Angelo, breaking from the hug to hold Damien at arm's length. "Get changed and text Mirror- we're going to go find her."

It took longer than it should have for Damien to get ready. Angelo's own costume wasn't difficult to don- after a few unfortunate surprises, he'd taken to wearing a morph-friendly suit anytime it was feasible to do so. Still, eventually, they made their way into the security van parked outside and trundled their way into the downtown core.

Mira texted the address of the last place she'd heard from the Winter Knight. There was something wrong. She hadn't said as much, but she hadn't used any capitalization or punctuation and there was a spelling mistake in the street name. That was a bigger red flag than when Damien said he was fine. He wasn't the right person to fix this. Caroline would know how to solve this, even if her solution would probably be to completely disregard their fearless leader and move on with whatever plan she thought best. All Angelo could do- all Stone's Throw could do- was his best.

The two of them were walking down the street in the rougher part of town. This far past sunset, this part of town was eerily quiet.

"Say, friend Arrow, did I ever tell you the story behind these boots?"

"Yes- you said that your little sisters got them for you."

"That much is true, but the full story is actually far more complex. It started the first time I morphed- I actually spent several hours hiding behind a chunk of granite, trying to-"

"Stone's Throw! Arrow!"

A familiar figure rounded the corner ahead of them and came running in their direction. Arrow was instantly in a firm defensive position. Stone's Throw waved him off.

"Hold your fire, friend Arrow! This is only young Talf- Tall Lad. No threat."

Arrow eased back to a ready stance. Tall Lad took a breath.

"Tell me, friend Tall Lad, why have you come to us? Are you once again searching for our heroic expertise? I must admit, this is not the best time for a sidekick-for-the-day, but I'm sure that-"

"No! I'm not here for you! There's a MONSTER meeting near here- they might have the missing girl."

"How do you know that? What do you know about the missing person?" asked Stone's Throw.

"Nothing," said Talfryn. "And I- I just know, okay?"

"Talfryn, you have to tell us. Anything could be useful," said Arrow, almost gently. "It's for Rilla."

"Rilla's missing?"

Arrow nodded, once. His composure was admirable. Only his best friend in the entire world would have been able to tell that he was trembling and only someone who owed Arrow his life a dozen times over would have been able to see the way he was breathing. Stone's Throw put a hand on Arrow's shoulder.

"Alright. For Rilla. I, uh, I heard it."

"You heard it? Where?"

"About four blocks that way," he answered. "I haven't had the chance to look yet."

"Hang on, where's your brother?" asked Arrow.

"Dampierre turned into a horse eight blocks ago and carried him off that way-" Talfryn gestured behind him- "but I could hear you were out here."

He tugged the bottom of his hoodie awkwardly.

"Egads, Talfryn! You have superpowers!"

Talfryn shrugged and didn’t comment.

"Come on, we have to save Rilla!" he said instead.

"Indeed!"

Before Talfryn could say anything more, Stone's Throw scooped him up and set him on his shoulder. Then, he and Arrow set off into the night at a well-practiced pace.

"Hey! Put me down! You've run with me before!"

"Worry not, young sidekick! We'll be there soon!"

When they arrived at the empty warehouse, there was no sign of anything amiss. Tall Lad stopped them all outside the building for a moment to listen before waving them in. His costume was really quite ingenious- the only thing visible under his hood from any angle was the bottom half of his face, but he already had brooding down to a science.

They walked past a locker room that was in complete disarray-nothing unusual there. One locker, though, appeared to be leaking. Stone's Throw paused to wrench it open. He set the door down gently beside the open locker and knelt. Inside, in a half thawed chunk of ice was-

"Winter Knight's helmet?"

"I don't like this," said Talfryn.

"Stay behind me, Tall Lad. I'll keep you safe."

"Thanks..." muttered Tall Lad as they made their way further into the building.

The main room was full of crates and pallets of various bits of machinery. It looked like every other warehouse Talfryn had ever seen. And yet...

"Have you seen this, Stone? These boxes were moved recently. Look at the dust," commented Arrow.

"Quite odd indeed! I wonder what could have happened here?"

"It must have been some kind of meeting," said Tall Lad. Something wasn't right here- Tal just had to figure out what it was…

"An interesting hypothesis! However, young Tall Lad, one can never be too hasty to jump to conclusions. There are any number of

explanations!"

Tall Lad stepped forward and handed Stone's Throw a sheet of paper. At the top, it said "MEETING MINUTES(Preliminary)".

"An excellent find! Keep this up and you'll be a superhero before you know it!"

"If you say so..."

While Stone's Throw was distracted with patronizing Tall Lad, Arrow drifted to the nearest corner and gasped.

"What is it?"

"Look at these posters! That's- that's-"

"A superhero! Quite unusual."

"A superhero? A superhero, he says! That's Helicoid, the first superhero in recorded history, the man who opened the path for the rest of us. These posters are old- they might even be 30s originals."

There was the sound of splitting wood.

"These crates are full of... comic books!"

"Wonders never cease," said Arrow. He touched the plastic packaged books reverently. "These are first editions!"

"Indeed they are! I must confess, I've always been a touch sentimental."

Across the room, a figure stepped out from a door labelled OFFICE.

"Hello, boys. You're just in time."

The figure stepped into the light, revealing a familiar logo stretched over a generous paunch.

"Helicoid?" asked Arrow and Stone's Throw, almost in unison.

"Indeed. I was hoping that you'd already been sent this way. I need your help."

"How do we know it's really you?" asked Tall Lad.

"Come now," said the figure, stepping forward magnanimously. "Surely you know who I am. Helicoid! Super strength, bullet proof, the ultimate hero."

"What do you need from us?" asked Arrow.

"I need your help to rescue the missing girl. Come, walk with me."

Arrow stepped forward. His eyes looked almost.. glazed over? He moved with an exaggerated slowness that didn't suit the speedster at all.

"Perfect!" said Stone's Throw. His eyes were still clear. "Young Tall Lad, this is the perfect opportunity to learn from a master in the field."

"His patch is ironed on! There's no way that's really Helicoid."

"I think you'll find that you're *mistaken* ," said Helicoid. This time, Tall Lad could almost hear it. There was something wrong with that voice.

"Come, Talfryn. If you ever want to be a hero, there's no better mentor than the man who started it all," said Helicoid, stepping forward again to set a paternal hand on his shoulder. Talfryn ducked out of the way.

"How did you know my name?"

"I pay very close attention to these things, Talfryn. You should know what that's like more than anyone."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Young Tall Lad, I'm sure-"

"No. No no no no no-"

With each refusal, Tal took another step away from the group. On the last no, he ran back first into a row of crates, toppling it with a crash that snapped the tension in the air like it was a rubber band in a third grade classroom in June. Tal did a half twist and spotted a door.

"Nope! I'm not- I- no!"

He bolted, disappearing through a heavy door labelled WAREHOUSE STORAGE ACCESS 2. The whole place was too familiar.

He'd known the job was a little shady, but it paid well and working the graveyard shift meant that he could work three days a week at somewhere

that actually had insurance. His only job had been to move boxes, boxes that were eerily similar to the ones he was sprinting through now. There were as many hours as he wanted and no safety gear to speak of. The night that everything had changed had been just like this one, actually. The rushed, panicked thrum of somethingiswrongsomethingiswrong had been present then to, as well as-

The sound of-was that sniffling?- drew Tal out of his head and back into the empty warehouse.

Elsewhere, Caroline was not having a good time.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to say thank you," scoffed Amaryllis.

"I could have defeated them by myself! I didn't need your help."

"Oh sure, it really looked like you knew what you were doing. The two goons that had you pinned really gave it away!"

"Look, let's just get out of here."

"No! I mean, we should get Doctor Lord."

"Why? He got himself into this situation and he has to deal with the consequences."

"Your job is to protect the civilians, right?"

"Yes?"

"Great. He's a civilian and I'm not leaving without him."

Suddenly, Rilla wrenched her shoulder forward, pulling out of Caroline's grip and dating around the corner out of sight.

"Scientist? Stop that!"

No reply. Caroline set herself to running, missing her mask the whole time. This would be so much easier if she didn't have to worry about blowing her secret identity the whole time.

“Left up ahead- I’ll hold her with a keypad.”

Caroline didn’t answer.

“A little gratitude goes a long way, sweets!”

“Thank you,” said Caroline through gritted teeth. In her earpiece, a familiar voice blew her a kiss. She smiled, despite herself.

The walls of the little room were stone. Arum could feel every centimeter of it against his skin, even through his turtleneck. There was nothing here to distract him from the fact that Rilla was here, of all places. For him! And because she was here, she was probably dead. Even that silly hero couldn't save him now.

He looked at the wall in front of him blankly and started counting the 58 cinder blocks in it again, just for something to do. He made it to 27 before he heard something in the hallway.

"Keep an eye on the hallway. I'll do a sweep of these rooms."

Instantly, Arum drew all of his power into himself. There wasn't much of it to be had but he put his hand into a pocket full of soil and did his best. Outside the cell, he heard... not footsteps, exactly, but something familiar. When Arrow came bursting into his cell, he wasn't surprised. Resigned, maybe. He raised his hands slowly.

"I don't want any trouble, little hero."

"I should have known you were involved with MONSTER, villain."

Arum shrugged, lightly, keeping his hands raised. There was an edge to the hero that he didn't like.

"Where is Rilla?"

"Amaryllis? Far from this place, I hope."

Arrow took a half step forward before rocking back on his heels.

"So she's left, far from here, somewhere else- where could she be? this is the last place she was seen has MONSTER taken her somewhere else? Did I miss her by only inches? Oh, tranquility, tranquility."

He lunged forward suddenly, leaning in far too close. The wall pressed against Arum's back as he leaned away.

"Where did they take her?"

"Honeysuckle, I-"

"No more! I'll have no more of your honeyed words, fiend. You've taken my beloved and you've pulled my heart from it's true path. I shall have no more of it."

"I- what?"

"What?"

Through Arrow's ridiculous goggles, Arum met a familiar pair of honeysuckle purple eyes. The hero was clearly terrified and worse- he was in full-on hero mode. There was no room for any nuance. The world was defined by the black and white of heroism and villainy.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway didn't make things any easier.

"Damien!"

The hero's head turned toward the door so quickly it looked like he should have hurt himself.

"Rilla!"

Amaryllis came clattering through the doorway, nearly crashing headlong into the wall beside Arum.

"Damien! You're here! We have to get out of here!"

Arrow met her eyes with a cold detachment and Arum felt ice water sliding down his back. The look in those eyes...

"I cannot, my love. This... villain knows far too much about me, now. About us."

"Damien, please, you're scaring me," Amaryllis pleaded. Arum knew better. As the hero in front of him took a step forward, Arum took account of what he had on hand. A trickle of power that would not be enough to make a daisy bloom, a persistent ache in his bones for being so long away from the dirt and a cold stone wall at his back.

Damien took hold of Arum by the front of his shirt. Arum could already feel the hand trembling- he'd seen Arrow could do to the terrain in his wake; he didn't want to see what that would look like on a person. Then again, he mused, dazedly, he likely wouldn't get the chance.

Damien looked him in the eyes and, for a moment, everything was still. And then, in a breeze, the hero was gone.

Then the world shifted as everything turned to mirrors. He heard Arrow shout something about mazes before everything vanished.

Stone's Throw, standing guard, heard the cry. When he made his way into the room though, it was completely empty. He heard heavy footsteps on the stone floor behind him and turned just in time to see-

"Caroline?"

"Of course it's me. Give me that helmet."

Stone's Throw handed over the helmet before he could think better of himself.

"Come on," said the Winter Knight voice half modulated. "We've got to find the civilian."

"There's a civilian? Egads!"

"We don't have time to stand about chatting- I'll fill you in on the move."

When Dampierre finally stopped running, Marc had many questions.

"Okay, buddy, where the hell are we?"

Dampierre snorted.

"You don't have to be rude about it! I'm not the one who brought us here. Fine, fine, though- *why* are we here?"

Dampierre nickered and gestured at the slumped building in front of them.

"Thank you Dampierre, I can see the terrifying chemical plant in front of us. I'm so glad you- oh *absolutely not,* under no circumstances."

Dampierre snorted again and started advancing towards the building with Marc still on his back.

"Okay, okay. Let me down, I'll go myself."

Dampierre chortled triumphantly and shifted neatly into a squirrel, dropping Marc and his chair on the cracked pavement. Marc, in turn, grumbled good naturedly and started moving towards the building. Night had just begun to fall and the area felt unnaturally dark. There were no street lights for miles. He would be much more comfortable

inside, even if it was in there.

Marc made it about two pushes into the old chemical plant before he realized how wrong that was. Two pushes in was about when he noticed the bomb. He killed his forward movement with a jerk and turned slowly to Dampierre, who was once again a very large St. Bernard.

“How did you know this was here?”

Dampierre wasn’t looking at him.

“Dampierre, seriously. This isn’t like leftovers. You can’t just… know something like this is here without some kind of explanation.”

Dampierre looked at him and sat down, panting.

“Okay. But after this, you *will* explain this.”

Marc looked at the bomb again. It was deceptively small for something so destructive- no obvious tangles of wire or glowing green vials here. Just a block of plastic explosive stuck to the back wall with a small timer on the outside. The building wouldn’t take much of a push (and there were probably more bombs out there anyways). And if the rumours about the old chemical pools were true, this would be very bad for the swampland surrounding it.

“What was it Tal said about swamps?” asked Marc, approaching the bomb carefully. “Transitional ecosystems, requiring great adaptability. It’s not a full on superhero moment but- I think we can do that.”

Dampierre transformed into a lizard and flicked his tongue out at Marc.

“That’s the spirit. Let’s save this… random factory.”

A city away, Arrow had run into yet another mirror.

“That isn’t going to help anything, Honeysuckle.”

“Not a word out of you, villain! This is none of your concern!”

“If you keep running into walls, I’ll have to drag your sorry human corpse out of here. Let’s do this rationally, for once.”

Arrow bounced off another wall.

“Fine. Let’s move. If this is Mirror’s doing, there’ll be a way out not far off.”

“If you boys are done arguing, let’s go.”

The trio stood up and made their reluctant way further into the maze of mirrors.

In the meantime, Stone’s Throw and the Winter Knight (armour reclaimed along the way) made their way deeper into the fortress. There was little to be fond- more villains to be dispatched (frozen to the ground or dispatched as required) and more machinations. Neither took much damage, but it was clear that they would need another plan to get out. Winter Knight acted odd the whole way- calling for sudden turns or halting them just before a security patrol arrived. All of this was entirely understandable, but things became less so when they reached the technology room. Stone’s Throw stood in the centre of the room, still as his namesake. The whole room was full

of a series of flashing lights, monitors and wires. Stone's Throw barely dared breathe. A glance around the room revealed no enemies and no room for concealment. The only hiding spot was a large black leather chair facing a bank of monitors.

"I'm going to call in an ally," said Winter Knight. "Don't. Panic."

"Aw, babe," said a voice from the chair. "If you need help, all you had to do is ask."

The chair spun around to reveal a figure in a glittery cat's eye mask and a tight catsuit. Stone's Throw's eyes widened and he moved to a ready stance, nearly knocking over a bank of something electronic.

"Sorceress!"

"Hold, Stone!

The Sorceress in question stretched languorously.

"In the flesh! For now, at least. What can I do for you?"

Winter's Knight opened her mouth and then closed it again

"That is a very good question."

"Wait," said Stone's Throw. He opened his phone and checked Arrow's location. "Look here! If he had been truly teleported away- even if he

were lost in the mirror maze, as he said before he vanished, he wouldn't be here at all. But he's-"

"-still in the building..." finished Winter's Knight.

"Now that is something I can work with," said Sorceress.

Talfryn was really sick of being afraid. So far, he has not found anything in the warehouse, but cameras seemed to follow him as he walked deeper into the labyrinthine depths. He could hear something- almost at the edge of his perception. He could have walked this warehouse blindfolded.

Marc hadn't wanted him to take the job- under the table work was shady enough at the best of times and this gig had more than a few red flags. Still, they'd needed money and cash in hand was cash in hand. All he was supposed to do was move a few boxes.

Against his will, Talfryn stopped walking.

When he'd walked in on the deal at the back of the warehouse, four weeks into the gig, everything had stopped for a moment. Then the goons had seized him and-

Talfryn shook his head and took another step forward.

He remembered the pain vaguely. He remembered breaking out less- Marc had been there, and one of them had broken through a concrete wall. He had only really come back to himself later, in the middle of the hospital visit they couldn't afford.

This time, it would be different. Talfryn was sure of it. With each step, the crying became clearer. He made his way around the shelves, ducking automatically under the too-long boxes on the sixth shelf. At the back of the warehouse, he found a small door, cracked just a hair. It was all too familiar- locked during his shift. Opened, after he'd interrupted the deal. He would have stopped right there if it hadn't been the source of the crying.

He knocked at the door gently before coming in.

"Hello? I'm here to help."

The little girl wired into the chair in the corner of the room looked at him curiously for a second. Talfryn did his best to look harmless as he approached.

“Hey there. I’m Talfryn. Let’s get you out of here.”

“All’s well that ends well, I suppose,” said Arum, sprawled over Damien and Rilla on the Keeps’s version of a couch. In the corner of the room, the kid was sound asleep on a large mushroom, being fawned over by the Keep. Everyone else except for Caroline was sitting or leaning against various other furnishings

“I’d have to agree, friend lizard!” said Angelo, back in human form. “There will be more to deal with later but for now, it’s enough to have saved the day!”

“Sure,” said Marc. “If I remember correctly, it was Talfryn who saved the kid and stopped Queenie’s paranoia.”

“Which would have been impossible without the distraction caused by our presence in the holoprojection,” Damien pointed out.

“And without the sorceress,” Rilla pointed out, with her face half-mashed into the couch, “none of this would have been possible, so be nice, all of you. I’m too tired to listen to your bickering.”

The room fell quiet with a general chorus of agreement. They would have more battles to fight- MONSTER was still out there, and there were still mysteries solved. But in this moment, with the exhausted superheroes taking a well-earned rest, vigilantes redeemed and villains defeated or redeemed in turn, there was no concern other than this brief moment of repose. Or at least for most of them.

Marc was the only to notice Dampierre’s new form- something entirely out of this world. He narrowed his eyes at Dampierre, who shrugged with too many shoulders. That, he decided, firmly, was a problem for another day.

End Notes

I linked the art at the top and it's wonderful, far better than I had ever imagined. The scenes depicted are: 1- Arrow discovering the window in the first scene 2- the drive back after Rilla bails Marc out 3- tfw you accidentally run into your nemesis in line at the same sandwich shop (wait isn't he part plant does he even EAT? 4-Tall Lad and Stone's Throw Save The Day (from a group of young children causing trouble) 5- Rilla and Winter's Knight hanging out in an empty parking lot, about to Cause Problems

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!